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The 1971 Istanbul Conference: First Face-to-Face Meeting of Many Cross-Cultural Psychologists

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In the summer of 1971 an interesting meeting took place in Tarabya, a suburb just north of Istanbul, on the Bosphosrus. The original purpose was to hold a conference on 'mental tests', their theoretical bases and practical applications, and, in particular, the problems and difficulties with respect to testing in a context in which variance in the cultural environment and in learning opportunities had demanded increasing attention. The proposal leading to this conference was made by Hasan Tan, professor of psychology at the Middle East Technical University. The proposal was submitted to the NATO Advisory Panel on Human Factors, a Panel advising the NATO SCIENCE COMMITTEE on its scientific programme. One may wonder: why NATO?

Of course, the NATO was primarily a defence organization, but had realised that continued economic and social progress was closely tied to scientific advances. It therefore decided to further implementation of the non-military collaborative efforts and to the strengthening of the scientific performance and infrastructure within the alliance, and, in particular, to improve and support science in the scientifically less advanced countries. NATO established the NATO Science Committee to realise this, and this Committee was advised by a number of Panels for scientific areas that deserved special attention. Human Factors was one of these areas, and in biannual sessions the Panel on Human Factors had to allocate funds to proposals for research collaboration, for conferences and for a training programme in the field of psychology and ergonomics. In 1970 Dick Trumbul, the head of the Human Factors Division of the Office of Naval Research (ONR) in the US was the chairman, and I was member of that Panel.

As said, a proposal for a conference on mental testing, with the objective to bring the countries with a less advanced level of psychometrics and 'test and measurement' on a more equal footing as compared with the more advanced countries, was submitted by Hasan Tan. HF Panel agreed, but required a strong, international programme committee. We were lucky to find the widely renowned Lee Cronbach willing to chair the programme committee, and the Turkish expert in testing Husnu Arici (Haceteppe University) and the up-and-coming star Claude Levy Leboyer (Université Rene Descartes, Paris) to be members of this Committee. I was asked to join the Programme Committee as a Panel member and on the basis of my interest and expertise.

Hasan Tan served as the President of the meeting, and much help to matters both large and small was given by an appointed organizing committee under his chairmanship, and with the members Drs. Arici, Kagitcibasi, Pekinturk and Turgut. In addition to NATO money a special grant was received from the Turkish Scientific and Technical Research Council, and a grant from the Social Science Research Council of the USA, which supported travel for a number of Latin American partners.

The Programme Committee held a number of meetings under the inspiring and expert chairmanship of Lee Cronbach, who not only had a thorough knowledge of the subject, but who also knew a large number of people and names in the field. The Organizing Committee suggested an agenda for the conference that would cover not only practical testing but also basic studies of cognitive development from psychological and anthropological perspectives.

Survey papers were solicited from experienced persons, and an invitation to contribute communications was widely distributed. Fortunately it was possible to open the conference to persons from all nations, and some 30 countries were represented in the programme, making it an unusually far-ranging survey of current thinking at the time. Among the participants were the established names in cross cultural psychology, as well as a good many of the later well known celebrities in cross cultural psychology, of course not yet grey or bald, and still full of youthful presumptuousness.

The papers and invited addresses covered a good deal of what at present would be called 'culture and cognition' (as for instance the title of the book of Berry and Dasen reads). There was a strong opposition to reliance on tests in isolation, for either scientific or practical purposes. While many of the contributions demonstrated how tests could be used effectively. limitations of tests received equal emphasis. The contributions were grouped in the following clusters:

- *Testing in its social framework*, with contributions of H. Arici, P. J. D. Drenth, R. H. Blake, S. Biesheuvel and P. Dague,
- *Cross cultural research strategies and technical issues and proposals regarding tests to be used in a cross cultural context*, with contributions of J. W. Berry, P. R. Sanday, L. H. Eckensberger, L. J. Cronbach, S. H. Irvine and J. T. Sanders, H. van der Flier, G. J. Mellenbergh and L. Hürsch, W. Clays, G. V. Grant, M. Fatouros.
- *Testing procedures and devices*, with contributions of G. Ortar, N. C. de Kohan, R. Semin, S. Cho, S. S. A. Akeju, A. S. Gitmez, P. F. Cook and M. R. Molomo, H. Reuning, I. G. Ord, R. St. George, M. Bennett, D. W. McElwin, J. G.and C. Georgas, C. Kagitcibasi, D. Abul-Hubb, E. McDaniel, B. Rimland, J. D. Pauker, F. R Wickert.
- *Educational intervention and educational influence*, with contributions of R. Feuerstein, W. E. Lambert, L. M. Smith, E and R. M. Belbin, O. K. Kyöstö, V. C. Thrane.
- *Correlates and determinants of testperformance,* with contributions of C. Levy-Leboyer, M. S. Harrold-Stroebe, I. Ataman and S. Epir, P. Mittler, Y. Poortinga, Ch. G. M. Bakare, P. Ucman, J. Silvey.

Lee Cronbach invited me after the conference to be co-author of the book that was to be published with the contributions and proceedings of the conference. That book carried the title 'Mental tests and cultural adaptation', and was often referred to as an important beacon in the adventurous course of discovery, that cross cultural psychology was soon to take. For me personally this was an unequalled learning experience in article reviewing and book editing. In two weeks of hard work in Amsterdam we went together through all papers, discussed them thoroughly and tried to focus on the main message of the paper. The editorial experience, the competence to shorten and rephrase texts, and the writing skills of Lee Cronbach (who, by the way, had a first degree in journalism) were unparalleled. He had also a courageous and slightly cynical editorial attitude. I still remember him saying after have shortened a paper to one third of its original length: "So, I lost another friend". At the same time the author was hopefully taken in by an elegant formulation in the Foreword which read as follows: "Papers originally written gracefully

have been reduced to a telegraphic style that we hope conveys the same message, less elegantly".

As was amplified in the Foreword as well, the title of the book was chosen carefully. The term 'adaptation' was very much in the mind of the participants and frequently used in the contributions and discussions, but used in many different contexts. Some contributions addressed themselves to the specific difficulties in adapting an established testing procedure in case data are to be collected outside the culture of the test's origin. Other writers (notably Simon Biesheuvel) had introduced the term 'adaptability' as a property of the person tested indicating the ability to cope with the requirements of the environment. This concept was thought to be able to escape both the misleading connotations of the term 'intelligence' and the common emphasis on tests that measure crystallised, school-acquired knowledge. But immediately the question presents itself: adaptability to what? What constitutes adaptability for the African in the Kalahari desert may not constitute adaptability for taking a job in the gold mines or the tourist industry. Given this point of view, an adaptability test would consist of whatever correlates with success in learning the performances the environmental settings call for. But the tests for adaptability are supposed to be relevant in all or a majority of such settings, and will bear a strong resemblance again to the concept of 'general ability' from the classical test theory. Tests measure adaptive processes indeed, but it is also clear that the test-successful subject is likely able to employ the concepts and tactics that help in adapting to the particular culture that is dominant in Western nations. Then an interesting question presents itself: Is it good social planning to urge individuals to adapt to such a culture? Or would it be better to try to adapt the culture so as to fit better the characteristics of its population? Adaptability can easily be interpreted as echoing a desire to adapt to the status quo in society or work settings, and it was felt that the times demand instead an emphasis on how man can reshape the society to conform to human needs. It is clear that the deliberately chosen multi-meaning term 'cultural adaptation' in the title reflects a host of interesting questions and issues that were subject of discussion during the conference.

The adjective 'mental' needs explanation as well. To avoid an unmanageable spread of topics the organizing committee has restricted attention to intellectual measures. At the conference, however, many found the old division between 'cognitive' and 'affective' activities an impediment to interpretation. They saw task performance as social, motivational, and temperamental, as well as cognitive. In fact, explanations of results on 'cognitive' tasks were often couched in terms of 'affective' concepts: self-confidence, preference among rewards. conditioned attitudes, etc. Also in this sense it was felt that the term 'adaptability' is broader and probably more adequate than 'intelligence', making a place for the affective component of performance. It appeared that the term 'mental tests' made better allowance for this criticism than the classical term 'intelligence tests'.

As far as the term 'cultural' is concerned, an equally critical attitude emerged towards the classical practice to identify cross cultural research as research that collects data in two or more nations. It was emphasised that research is equally cross cultural when it tests two distinct populations within the same nation. Even within single region or community there may be different cultures at work: different homes may use different

languages or life styles. The conference were as much interested in gradations of experience within a culture as they were in dramatic contrasts between Maori aboriginals and Londoners.

The presentations and the following discussions reflected a comprehensive presage of the prospective developments and debates within cross cultural psychology. Attention was given to subjects like the balance between environmental and genetic determinants of mental abilities, on the trainability of intellectual performance, on the question of fairness and bias in the use of tests, on the question whether verbal tests should be included or not in instruments used for cross cultural comparability, on the public resistance to tests and testing and the ways to cope with this, on the relatively uselessness of translation of tests and non-acceptablility of the use of norms in another culture, on the merits and restrictions of statistical techniques, such as the Rash model, for cross cultural comparison, on the culture bound character of test meaning and –interpretation, on the importance of 'functional equivalence' in tests to be interpreted cross culturally, on the requirement of operational comparability of test stimuli and desirability of comparable incentives and administrative procedures as the best way to get comparable data, on the importance of ethnographic as opposed to nomothetic methods of research in cross cultural psychology, and many others.

Taken as a whole, as we concluded in our summary and commentary of the book, the conference seemed likely to mark a watershed in applied and cross cultural psychology. Many questions turned a sceptical eye on many of the psychologist's long sacred beliefs. At present, 36 years later, many of these questions are still relevant and for the greater part not yet conclusively answered. We listed for instance: Are we measuring the right things? Are we too narrowly defining the kind of intellect to be valued? Are we sacrificing valuable indigenous cultures in the drive to increase productivity? Are we giving adequate thought to the dignity and right to self-determination of the examinee? Are we to accept correlations of ability with home background as inevitable, or are we to learn how to remove the limiting effects some homes have? Are we to continue to certify abilities only after they have been developed, or are we to return to the original problem, of detecting capabilities that could be developed if we changed child rearing or education or industrial training? Can the diversity that exists between societies be made into a resource for human progress by cultivating multiple styles of expression and adaptation? Are tests to be used to adapt people individually and collectively to the presently dominant model of Western industrial society, or are they to uncover human potentialities to which cultures can be adapted?

Many of the specific cross cultural issues that were discussed were taken up in more detail in later conferences or in a number of authoritative handbooks, but I think it is fair to say that a good few of the seeds for this later harvest were sown at this Istanbul Conference.